



Guiding FORCE

Robert Rauschenberg and
his namesake award provide
inspiration for area artists

BY BARBARA LINSTROM-ARNOLD

FOR THE PAST TWENTY-FIVE YEARS, A HANDFUL OF LOCAL ARTISTS HAS BEEN HONORED

each year with a scholarship in the name of the most famous and influential artist to call Southwest Florida home—Robert Rauschenberg. Known for having taken the art world to new horizons, Rauschenberg's iconoclastic and raucous maneuvers in abstract expressionism defy language. Whenever critics either praised or lambasted his propensity for breaking the rules and creating works that evaded interpretation, he didn't even wince.

"I always felt I had nothing to lose," says Rauschenberg. "I was a notoriety

medium: dance, photography, writing, painting, sculpting, filmmaking, or music. Being a Rauschenberg scholar, however, is about much more than the money. With it also comes a commitment to art in the name of none other than Robert Rauschenberg, who some consider today's most famous living artist.

Supporting New Talent

For twenty-one-year-old James Milne, the scholarship is keeping his passion alive. As a senior at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), he has won the Rauschenberg Award for the last three years in a row. "It's really pretty cool," he says. "To be associated with Robert Rauschenberg is a real honor."

Milne has found his schooling in Chicago to be eye-opening in terms of exposure to various media. Though he entered SAIC as a promising painter, he has found film and video art to be his current ambition. "Painters love something about paint, and I

don't have that," he says. "It's taken me about a year and a half to realize what I really want to focus on." After he graduates next year, Milne will follow in Rauschenberg's footsteps by moving to New York City, where he plans to pursue an M.F.A. in filmmaking at New York University.

Milne represents the new breed of Rauschenberg scholar. Whereas older artists tended to receive the award in the past, BIG ARTS has turned its attention to the up and coming. "Our focus the past few years has been on these animated and passionate high school and college students who are just taking off with their studies and their careers," says Lee Harder, executive director at BIG ARTS. The organization has not, however, imposed any age restrictions.

Funds from Rauschenberg are augmented by donations to BIG

ARTS that are earmarked for the award. The amount of money available each year depends on such donations. "We would really like to develop this more," says Harder. "The more people who support it, the more support we can offer the artists in their future endeavors."

For many years, longtime Sanibel resident Syril Ivler Rubin headed up the award selection committee. "We really had some great talent come through," she recalls with nurturing pride.

In 2001, a gregarious thirty-one-year-old islander by the name of Eric Riemenschneider was waiting tables at a Captiva Island restaurant while aspiring to realize his dream of attending one of the nation's leading art schools. "Rauschenberg and I had the islands in common," says Riemenschneider, who had lived on Sanibel for about ten years at that time. "He was definitely inspirational to me, and I needed all the help I could get for tuition."

Encouraged by a few former Rauschenberg scholars, Riemenschneider applied for a scholarship after he found out he had been accepted into the illustration program at the Ringling School of Art and Design in Sarasota. "It was a big deal that I was accepted, and then to get the scholarship, that was a real honor," he says. "I went on to study



Rauschenberg Award-winner **JAMES MILNE** started out as a painter but has discovered film and video art while attending the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

before anybody could even remember my name."

The brazen young artist from a working class family in Port Arthur, Texas, broke through the New York scene in the 1940s and has continued to grow ever since. He has called Captiva Island home since the early '70s. Within Southwest Florida, he is known for his generous show of community support.

To encourage the pursuit of art, Rauschenberg annually donates to a scholarship fund in his name awarded through BIG ARTS on Sanibel Island. Artists who have received the BIG ARTS Robert Rauschenberg Award have made inroads into the local and even national art scene. First offered in 1985, the award typically goes to three or four artists a year, with scholarships ranging from \$500 to \$3,000. Last year, awards totaled \$8,000.

Originally intended only for island residents, the monies are now available to Southwest Florida artists in any



Freelance illustrator **ERIC RIEMENSCHNEIDER** used his Rauschenberg Award to help fund his schooling at the Ringling School of Art and Design.

Rauschenberg as part of my program.”

Riemenschneider’s illustrations, some of which have been published for the last two years in *Times of the Islands* magazine, are admittedly influenced by the master. “I use mixed-media in my illustrations, but rather than using the photo-transfer method, I combine elements digitally,” says Riemenschneider, who also credits his schooling for his state-of-the-art craftsmanship. Now a budding freelance illustrator with clients from California to New York, he is well on his way to a fulfilling career.

Opening Doors

Some highly notable names in the Southwest Florida art scene were once Rauschenberg scholars. Sanibel glass artist Lucas Century received the honor in the early 1990s as a way to inspire future artists. “The year prior, they had decided that professional artists—those who make a living at their art, like I was—couldn’t apply,” says Century. “But I had this idea that made them change their minds.”

Rather than using the funds to attend a workshop or an institution, Century applied for \$1,000 to cover the cost of producing a piece to donate to the Edison Park Creative and Expressive Arts School in Ft. Myers. For the school, Century created an abstract mural on the transom panel above the entry door. “My approach was totally different; they really liked the idea,” he says. “I early on realized as an artist that to fulfill my dream of making community art, I would have to be part of the reality of paying for it.”

Century, who is best known for having etched the walls of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, is currently designing etchings for large walls of granite in downtown Ft. Myers by the new Lee County Justice Center expansion. “Public art is there for the benefit of all,” he says, adding that he hopes his piece at Edison Park serves to inspire students.

Another well-known Southwest Florida artist had both a



The Rauschenberg Award helped glass artist **LUCAS CENTURY** cover the costs of creating a piece for a Ft. Myers school.

reawakening and an affirmation thanks to her scholarship. JoAnne Bedient, currently acclaimed for her bright and zany Raku-fired shoes, applied for the Robert Rauschenberg Award in 1995, the year her second daughter graduated from high school.

“There was never any money for me to do anything,” says Bedient, who had been so busy raising her girls that she



Known for her Raku-fired shoes, **JOANNE BEDIENT** got a career kick-start thanks to the Rauschenberg Award.

hadn’t really utilized her degree in ceramics. “I really needed to take a workshop at that time. I was doing some experimenting in Raku, but I needed to learn more.”

Her Rauschenberg Award went toward a week-long workshop at the well-known Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. There, she found what she needed. “It was really validating,” she says. “It made me see that some of what I was doing was right on. It reinforced what I was doing. At forty-two, it also helped me with self-confidence.”

Bedient started creating her whimsical and wild shoes in 1998, taking inspiration from a pair of red patent-leather platform shoes

her older daughter had purchased from a ’70s resale shop. Eleven years after winning the Rauschenberg Award, Bedient’s unique sculptures—especially her signature shoes—can be found in galleries from Sanibel to Manhattan. “My shoes have definitely taken me places,” she notes. “But I don’t want to be known just for my shoes.”

Based in Ft. Myers, Bedient reflects on the Rauschenberg scholarship as a confirmation of her future as an artist. Being recognized in the name of Robert Rauschenberg made her feel more capable. “It really was a turning point for me,” she says.

Providing Assistance

Another major player in the Southwest Florida art scene attributes a noteworthy career boost to his Rauschenberg Award. Jack O’Brien, curator at The von Liebig Art Center in Naples, recalls the actual receipt of the award with pride and enthusiasm.

“I remember being at this awards ceremony at BIG ARTS at a table with all the other winners and being called up front,” he says. “It was such a special moment. It was a time of recognition and encouragement. There was a quiet peacefulness in people looking at you and expecting good things out of you later on.”

Living near Ft. Myers Beach at the

time, O'Brien applied for the award to help pay for his pursuit of an M.A. in arts administration at the University of New Orleans. He heard about the award while participating in life-drawing classes at BIG ARTS.

"I wanted the prestige of having a scholarship that Robert Rauschenberg had funded," says O'Brien, who won the award in 1999. "It certainly raised some eyebrows and occasionally dropped a jaw."

Having received the honor at the age of thirty-eight, O'Brien is keenly aware of the need for older artists to get help. "It's important for anyone who's returning to school," he says. "You're very determined and you don't have the same funding sources that you once had."

As the curator of The von Liebig, O'Brien embraces the concept of supporting up-and-coming artists. Like Century, with his work to foster development of the arts among area youth, O'Brien has taken it upon himself to promote artistic expression. The works of some six hundred students enrolled in the art center's children's program are annually displayed at Naples City Hall thanks to his initiative.

"It means so much to any artist—whether five or sixty-five years old—to have their work on exhibit, where people stand back and examine and ponder," he says. "Presenting it properly elevates it to a work of art."

O'Brien, who had wanted to be a painter during his college years, reached a point of settling for an artistic milieu. "I decided I wanted to be in a creative environment where things are bubbling up, so to speak," he says with enthusiasm. When he decided to get a master's in arts administration, O'Brien was quite familiar with the struggle of trying to make a living by making art. To him, it all starts with supporting the individual artists. "It's just wonderful that Rauschenberg has that grassroots concern," says O'Brien.

For Rauschenberg, it's that primal urge to make art that makes us human. "Life without art—I can't imagine life without art," says the veteran artist, who turns eighty this year.

Through his ability to take everyday materials and scenes and create master-

ful work, Rauschenberg has transformed an aspect of the American art scene forever. Hurricane Charley devastated his home as well as the home and studio of his best friend, neighbor, and colleague, Darryl Pottorf. In spite of this, and also having endured a stroke, hip



Now curator of The von Liebig Art Center, **JACK O'BRIEN** got his master's in arts administration with a little assistance from the Rauschenberg Award.

fracture, and radiation treatments Rauschenberg kept producing.

Further testimony to Rauschenberg's reputation is his resistance to intimidation. "He's fearless. He's the only person [who] slept all night long when we were staying with the headhunters tribe in Borneo," says Pottorf, in reference to one of the many adventures the two have taken across the globe in search of images for their art. "I didn't sleep...and I had a towel around my neck."

With such a strong character and legendary artist behind its name, the Robert Rauschenberg Award carries much more weight than its monetary amount. For SAIC student Milne, who will likely this May become a four-time winner, the award has made a world of difference.

His mother, Martha, an adjunct

instructor at Edison College, is awestruck by the commitment BIG ARTS has shown to her son. She has seen some of Milne's friends feel forced to choose to major in economics instead of art. "Most of them lose heart," she says. "They want to be able to make a living. But they're miserable."

Meanwhile, Milne has been able to experiment, contemplate, and redirect his artistic sensibilities. "I went through a period where I was really confused," he says. "I came [to SAIC] for my painting and I've gotten a lot of attention for it, but it really wasn't me. Now I'm really hoping to make movies when I get to New York."

Despite having such a supportive environment for pursuing his art, Milne isn't untouched by the notion that artists can't survive in this day and age. "Ten years from now? Hopefully I'll still be making art, even if I have to have a day job," he says.

Meanwhile, the kid from Texas with nothing to lose remembers his early days in Manhattan, desperately selling a painting for \$15. "That's what I needed for my rent, \$15," Rauschenberg remembers. "I

had to walk with it uptown in a windstorm because I couldn't afford a subway even." With his pieces now selling for millions of dollars, Rauschenberg provides plenty of inspiration for the artists receiving his namesake award.

Applications for the Robert Rauschenberg Award are due each year during the third week of March, with winners announced in May. To find out more about the award, contact BIG ARTS at 239-395-0900. 📞

Barbara Linstrom-Arnold received the Robert Rauschenberg Award in 1997 to study screenwriting at the International Film and Television Workshops in Rockport, Maine. Currently, she produces historical documentaries and a magazine-format television show covering Florida Gulf Coast University for WGCU-TV, the local PBS affiliate.